

A Perspective on the Unserved Mildly Handicapped

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THE public schools have become a prime target of social critics. Illiterate young adults, drug problems, and the breakdown in many family structures are often presented as examples to illustrate what schools are not doing, or are contributing to by their lack of responsiveness. The assumption underlying the voice of the critics is that the bureaucracy of public education is both insensitive to the life needs of individuals and unresponsive to the dictates of society, that is, the broader population of consumers. For critics and more objective students of the American educational process, the trends occurring in the way public schools are meeting the educational needs of handicapped students should serve as an unprecedented example of change. Certainly, the current redirection of programing and the reallocation of resources for handicapped children were preceded by a history of insufficient effort. It must also be acknowledged that the observed changes were stimulated by federal legislation, Public Law 93-380 and Public Law 94-142. Legislative influence, however, is often required to help public institutions overcome built-in restraints and the general apathy of the citizenry, which controls the bottom line on the commitment of public resources.

The activities surrounding Child Find, implementation of individualized education programs, and the application of due process procedures are clearly visible at all levels of public education. It does not take a skilled observer to note that changes are occurring, and that the changes are not restricted to handicapped children and youth. These innovations are influencing the roles of all professional educators and the education of nonhandicapped students as well. Because emerging practices are often in contrast with those of the past, there is a tendency for value judgments to interfere with good decision making. These trends serve as examples of change in public policy; their impact must be subjected to further analysis. The value of these trends as evidence of change

rests in their substance, not in their contrasts with the past.

Reported versus Assumed Prevalence

These introductory remarks are intended merely as a frame of reference for offering a perspective on mildly handicapped individuals as an important and possibly overlooked group within the population of unserved handicapped children and youth. The priorities of Public Law 94-142 are obvious, but how these priorities operationalize into assurances for the full range of handicapped children and youth is not clear. All handicapped children and youth are required to be identified. This requirement is inherent in the right to education principle, which also dictates that all handicapped children, once identified, must be served. The census of handicapped individuals between the ages of 3 and 21 becomes the basis upon which federal funds are generated and allocated.

The census figures being reported to the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped are substantially below the assumed prevalence level. If the data are accurate, then previous estimates were generally in error. On the other hand, if the data are in error, then the consequences are serious in that potentially large numbers of handicapped children and youth are not receiving an appropriate education. A secondary, but important, consequence is the loss of fiscal resources due to the failure of the public schools to identify and serve all handicapped students.

For purposes of this article, the authors are operating on the premise that the identification data being reported are low and that substantial numbers are not being identified. While this premise is not based on empirical data, the variability in prevalence rates reported across states and previous epidemiology studies support this premise.

If the child count is low, three basic questions must be addressed:

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1. What are the characteristics of students who are not being identified or reported?
2. What are the reasons for students not being identified as handicapped and reported?
3. Are the conditions that prevent or interfere with identification of handicapped children susceptible to change?

The primary hypothesis of the authors is that the unidentified population is composed basically of mildly handicapped children and youth. Several assumptions and underlying rationale are offered.

Political and Attitudinal Realities

Students with mild handicaps are generally identified through a system by which the regular class teacher initiates a referral. Mildly handicapped students seldom display characteristics that are obvious to the casual observer. In many cases, even parents are not sensitive to the cues that suggest a problem, because the handicapping condition becomes apparent through the interaction of the teaching/learning process. Unless regular class teachers are skilled in observation techniques and know what to look for, the mildly handicapped child may not be identified until the problem increases in severity and becomes obvious. The dependence on the regular class teacher as the referral initiator represents a potential problem in any attempt to be comprehensive and efficient in the identification process.

Because of Public Law 94-142 there may also be some political realities interfering with the teacher referral process. Regular class teachers have had enough experience with Public Law 94-142 to realize that even if they refer a mildly handicapped student, the student remains their responsibility. The most they can hope for is assistance from support personnel and possibly having the child placed part time in a resource room. They also know that if the student is referred and a handicap confirmed, they must then participate in conferences, develop individualized education programs, and maintain additional records for the student. Some regular class teachers have not felt that the support services developed thus far have been beneficial or that the students sent to resource rooms have profited significantly. The process of developing individualized education programs in many cases has been perceived as a noninstructional task. Regular teachers might view their role as nonrein-

forcing and thus accept the reality that, regardless of what they do, instructional responsibility for the student remains with them. They might then opt for doing what they can to improve the student's performance but not refer the child and thus avoid having to write individualized programs, participate in conferences, and prepare reports.

These observations are derived from the experience of the authors in working with regular classroom teachers and principals through inservice activities. It is a matter of concern that the identification process, which at an earlier time in history yielded a maximum result in identifying the mildly handicapped student, has undergone a transformation. The consequence has been a shift to precision and comprehensiveness at the severely/profoundly handicapped level and to a very conservative approach at the mildly handicapped level. The manner in which the conservative shift operationalizes is complex and varied. It is influenced by school policy, attitudes of professionals toward teaching mildly handicapped students, priorities for local education agency fiscal resources, and the schools' responses to what at times appear to be overwhelming demands. The determining factor does not appear to be one of definition or criteria, except as they become intertwined with policies and attitudes.

Assumptions to Consider

Reallocation of Resources

The first priority for improvement of services for severely handicapped students is causing local education agencies to redirect resources and in the process to reduce their commitment to mildly handicapped students.

As severely involved learners move into the public schools in increasing numbers, the legitimate demands placed upon local resources by absorption of this group take precedence over other needs. Though schools are now serving previously institutionalized or non-served groups, funds formerly allocated to institutions or other agencies have not been shifted to school budgets. Faced with inflation, declining enrollment, and a taxpayer's revolt at the polls, local and state authorities elect to serve first those deemed most in need of special programs. Meeting this need may cause a shift in unofficial priorities at the local level. The lack of experience in assessing and pro-

graming for severely handicapped students makes demands on administrators and other decision makers that serve to take time, energy, and related human resources from significant concerns specific to mildly handicapped students. The question of accountability also looms as a major distractor. An unserved severely handicapped child becomes the stimulus for a variety of actions, whereas an unserved mildly handicapped child is in school and his or her need for special instruction is at best debatable. Thus, for the local education agency the risks of falling short in identifying the severely handicapped child exceed those related to the mildly handicapped child.

Effects of Labeling

The assumed negative effects associated with labeling handicapped students are a major contributor to the mildly handicapped students being underrepresented in current census reports.

Because the regulations governing implementation of Public Law 94-142 have retained categories of exceptionality as the basis for eligibility, funding remains tied to categorical labels (or at least labeling remains a condition of identification). Criticism of such funding arrangements has been prevalent in the professional literature (Reynolds, 1973). For those whose handicap is obvious and severe, the tendency is to rationalize labeling as necessary, though distasteful. The labeling process does not appear to change substantially the way the severely handicapped learner is perceived by teachers and peers. This rationalization does not extend to the mildly handicapped learner, because many professionals operate on the belief that when labels are applied to youngsters whose appearance and behavior do not set them apart at first glance, their developmental variations become exaggerated and forced upon the consciousness of teachers and peers. Many professional persons further believe that a label may set up a self fulfilling prophecy in that teachers expect stereotyped behaviors to which a child may eventually conform. Furthermore, the risk of mislabeling learners is greater at the mild end of the continuum, since the condition constituting a handicap is more difficult to pinpoint when the variation from norms is minor. Labeling thus raises more issues of ethics and accountability when applied to mildly handicapped learners. The result may well be a

conservative stance by administrators and regular class teachers to risk unnecessarily labeling a child as handicapped.

Cultural and Economic Differences

Cultural and economic differences can mask mild handicaps and result in mildly handicapped students not being identified as handicapped but instead being served under other programs.

The bidialectal or bilingual learner is typically perceived by teachers as different from peers in the dominant culture. But differences that arise from mild handicaps may instead be ascribed to variations in behavior due to language, child rearing practices, or value systems of the minority culture. Indeed, these cultural features affect learning style and should be taken into account. But a learner may be linguistically different and also demonstrate a sensory, perceptual, or motor handicap. Failure to differentiate among the learning problems of such students may account for substantial numbers of mildly handicapped students not being identified.

The results of poverty and lack of access to medical care affect learning and may interfere with progress more than a sensory or motor impairment. At the same time, the assertion that learners are either disadvantaged or handicapped does not hold up. Distinctions between Title I and special education programs have been maintained for purposes of program evaluation and accountability. When such distinctions make it impossible for youngsters to benefit from a broad continuum of services, the administrative structure interferes with the provision of adequately individualized services. If learners are eligible for bilingual or Title I programs that exclude them from eligibility for other special programs, the argument that they are already receiving special services does not address the question of the appropriateness of the services in meeting their total needs.

Lack of Visibility

Mildly handicapped learners are not sufficiently visible to parents' groups. Thus, the power of advocacy that serves to influence identification of more severely handicapped individuals is less apparent in behalf of the mildly handicapped child.

Political activities of parents on behalf of handicapped children have had considerable

impact on both state and local practices. However, Reynolds (1973) pointed out that in recent years parents have tended to look to the courts for solutions through litigation rather than working through the slower legislative process. If parents' groups are taking this course, their interest is in championing the type of strong case that has clear merits and can stand up to adversary proceedings in a court of law. Few case studies of mildly handicapped learners would prove dramatic in court. Furthermore, group efforts by parents have been organized along categorical lines. Since the mildly involved do not fit readily into such categories, it is more difficult for advocacy groups to identify and articulate the needs of these learners. This tends to reduce pressure on the schools for identifying mildly handicapped students.

Substitution of Remediation

Mild handicaps are considered to be amenable to remedial approaches.

The theory behind this point of view seems to be that there is a direct relationship between the type and the degree of variation from the norm. If this were true, mildly handicapped youngsters would indeed benefit from the remedial approaches that are appropriate for the general population of underachievers. However, a mild handicap can prove just as permanent and just as resistant to skill improvement as a severe handicap. If this possibility is not taken into account, remedial approaches may be pursued beyond their usefulness. Alternative approaches, such as attempts to go around the disability with compensatory strategies, may not be considered by personnel accustomed to working with remedial youngsters. The seventh grader with persistent problems in recall of verbal material may indeed lack reading skills, but the child may be more substantially benefited by study skill strategies to cope with the disability than by remediation of word-attack skills as a means to comprehension. Strictly remedial approaches may not constitute an appropriate program when a disability must be circumvented throughout the life span. The probabilities are very high that a mildly handicapped student will be placed in a regular class with the teacher employing remediation programs that are inappropriate. It is reasonable to assume that substantial numbers of unserved mildly handicapped students are now considered to be ad-

equately served without the need for special education services. They therefore escape the Public Law 94-142 identification mechanism.

Situational Factors

Many mild variations from normal development constitute handicaps only under certain conditions.

When does a condition that varies from the norm constitute a handicap? Every teacher can testify that some children who are apparently different from most in sensory or motor characteristics nevertheless manage to benefit from regular classroom instruction. Some youngsters learn to compensate for handicapping conditions. Others are fortunate enough to work under optimal conditions.

Paul, whose developmental variations had been diagnosed as mild cerebral palsy, entered the ninth grade after doing average work in regular classrooms of a small school. Paul did well in social studies class, where grades were based on discussion, written products were generated by groups, and quizzes were objective. But Paul's English teacher referred him to special services because his motor impairments prevented his completing compositions in class and writing answers to essay questions on weekly tests.

Was Paul handicapped from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. each day but not from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m.? Ambiguities presented by situational factors contribute to difficulties in determining appropriate services for mildly handicapped youngsters. They also cause planning problems for local education agencies, which must have the capability to serve the child once conditions result in identification. If instructional conditions are improving in the public schools, then a reduction in the identification of learners with mild handicaps might be anticipated.

Implied Courses of Action

The validity of these assumptions will obviously be challenged. They were not presented as an indictment of public schools nor as a cynical statement. The authors are sensitive to the tremendous obligations to which local education agencies are falling heir and to the restraints that impinge on their responses. It may be that the requirement of full identification with the accompanying mandate for full service is unreasonable within the time frame allowed. If the timeline is to be adhered to,

then tolerance of anticipated results may be necessary for a period of time while local education agencies work their way through the procedural compliance responses. It appears that local education agencies, in an attempt to be in general compliance with Public Law 94-142, have not had sufficient time to deal conceptually with the programmatic implications of meeting the extensive and varied requirements of legislative mandates. Until this occurs, they are at a disadvantage in developing procedures that are both in compliance and compatible with sound program planning principles.

The problem of accounting for the underrepresentation of mildly handicapped students in the reported census is complex, but it is less complex than the required solutions. It would be an oversimplification of the task to offer solutions to the problems posed through the previously presented assumptions. As presently stated they imply certain courses of action, or at least lines of needed research.

At the risk of extending well known arguments or appearing naive regarding the bureaucratic necessities underlying the identification requirements of Public Law 94-142, two views regarding the future are offered.

Individualization for All Learners

Continued effort needs to be invested in moving toward an approach which defines instructional options that are effective in meeting the needs of students with learning problems. Having validated these options, then students in need of such options become defined as exceptional or handicapped. This is in contrast to focusing on learning characteristics and placing primary emphasis on whether or not a student possesses particular characteristics.

The clear intent of Public Law 94-142 is that the right of access to a free appropriate education be extended to all children. Yet as handicapped learners are increasingly served in the regular classroom, there is no corresponding attempt to allow access to special services for normally developing learners. The student who can learn normally most of the time but is handicapped sporadically by adverse environmental conditions has as much right to special services as does the child who is handicapped most of the time to be mainstreamed under conditions in which that child can function in the regular classroom. In the zeal to provide services to handicapped learn-

ers, the commonality of human rights shared by all learners may have been lost from view. Implementation of Public Law 94-142 should not be viewed as a special education movement, but as an educational innovation that allows all children access to programs meeting individual needs. To this end, special services must accommodate normally developing youngsters when they need special help (i.e., present themselves as being mildly handicapped), just as regular education has been asked to accommodate handicapped learners.

Acceptance of Ambiguity

Professional educators must resist the arbitrariness of furthering the two-valued practice of labeling mildly handicapped youngsters as either handicapped or nonhandicapped on the assumption that the process is that precise.

The problem of categorical funding as it affects mildly handicapped youngsters goes beyond the question of willingness to place a label on a child. The more fundamental question may be willingness to engage in the either-or thinking that must be the basis for the label. If we as educators are convinced that it is possible to say of mildly involved individuals that either they are handicapped or they are not handicapped, then we are attempting the precision of the two-valued logic that governs mathematics. Within that framework, it can be said that a figure has three equal sides or it does not.

However, the clarity and freedom from ambiguity enjoyed by mathematics does not extend to decisions to be made when serving mildly handicapped children. The reality that a mild variation from developmental norms can sometimes be a handicap and sometimes not a handicap is an ambiguity educators must learn to tolerate. It will then be possible to find ways to describe the mildly handicapped learner without resorting to either-or reasoning.

Reference

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